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ABSTRACT

The rhetorical cycle is a step-by-step approach that provides classroom experience before students actually write, thereby making the writing process less frustrating for them. This approach consists of six sequential steps: reading, thinking, speaking, listening, discussing, and finally writing. Readings serve not only as models of rhetorical modes and devices, but allow students to stockpile information. Students also learn to summarize ideas, synthesize those ideas in essays about personal experiences, and evaluate the significance of what they are doing. The thinking step involves invention, prewriting, organization, and strategies for good writing. The section is structured by having students brainstorm, list their own experiences, and free-write. The speaking step encourages students to explain to a small group their ideas and verbalize their outlines. While a student is speaking, the other members of the group are listening, the fourth step, and outlining the speaker's thoughts. Next, the group discusses the speaker's ideas and presentation. This discussion is essential since it is the effective rewriting of something that has not been written yet. At last, the students are ready for the final step, writing. (HOD)

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The Rhetorical Cycle:

Reading, Thinking, Speaking, Listening, Discussing, Writing

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The Rhetorical Cycle

Reading, Thinking, Speaking, Listening, Discussing, Writing

My students and I need help. I give them a paper assignment after several class discussions, and I see confused stares wondering what I expect from them. I ask if there are any questions and someone whines, "I don't get it; what are we supposed to do?" I summarize hours of discussion into a single sentence and send them away to write a masterpiece. As a student, I remember my own frustrations with writing. Although the teacher knew what she expected of us, I didn't know. I needed someone to take me through a paper step by step, showing me I could survive the torture of writing. I thought only I had a hard time writing or that I was the only dumb one in the class not knowing what was happening. The roles have now turned; I still remember my frustrations, but new frustrations are creeping in as students panic after an assignment. Even after detailed explanations, the assignments are not clear because the students have not practiced the assignment principles. Practice makes the assignment understandable. The students need practice exercises. I, like most teachers, am always searching for new strategies explaining how to write as well as how to disguise the pain of writing. The answer to many of my frustrations is the rhetorical cycle, a step by step approach to writing allowing practical classroom experience before students actually write, making

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the whole experience less painful. The rhetorical cycle is just that, a cycle. It is a process of six sequential steps. The steps are reading, thinking, speaking, listening, discussing, and finally writing. Notice that the last step is writing; writing is the end result. I will explain how this cycle works in my classroom by using a paper assignment, sample readings, student experiences, and student writings.

The rhetorical cycle began developing when I realized that historically, rhetoric was speaking not writing. Writing was introduced to rhetoric to help the speaker organize his thoughts. Today, however, rhetoric generally means composition without speech. Speaking is necessary to good writing. I now use speech for students to organize their thoughts; I have reversed the concept of historical rhetoric.

READING

The first step of the rhetorical cycle is reading. Readings serve not only as models of rhetorical modes and devices, but readings allow students to stockpile information. Readings stimulate good thinking. I use a thematic rhetoric/reader. With each essay the students read, I insist they respond with personal examples demonstrating how the essay affects them or reminds them of a particular incident in their lives. For example, one thematic unit is "People Under Stress." Some readings include George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," Philip

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Roth's "Defender of the Faith," and Robert Frost's "The Silken Tent." An obvious theme common to all three is peer pressure: the pressure to shoot the elephant so Orwell won't look a fool, the pressure to be fair yet impartial with the few Jewish soldiers in a Gentile army, and the pressure of tent pegs and cords tethering a tent in a summer breeze. As a class, we discuss this theme in relation to the readings. Our discussion centers on how the authors develop their ideas, appeal to the reader, and use various modes and devices. I present paradigms illustrating definition, classification, comparison, narration, description, and argumentation. The students learn summary, synthesis, and critique. In the readings I've mentioned, students recognize obvious patterns of narration and concrete description such as the elephant's grinding the Coolie or the dew-loosened tent cords. Students also notice subtle definitions of implied terms such as peer pressure created by society, one's own religion, or by one's self. Students now compare authors' definitions with their personal definitions of peer pressure. They learn to summarize ideas, synthesize those ideas and essays with personal experiences, and evaluate the significance of what they're doing. Reading is the basis for thinking and writing.

THINKING

After discussing the theme of peer pressure presented in the readings, we begin the next phase of the rhetorical

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cycle: thinking. The students become more actively involved. During class discussions, some passively sit waiting to hear what I or the more vocal students in the class have to say about the essay. Now each student must become involved. Although thinking sounds passive, my class exercises involve work. Writing and thinking are inseparable, and to get stucents to think, I have them write. This thinking section involves invention, prewriting, organization, and strategies for good writing. I structure this section by having the students brainstorm and list experiences they have had with peer pressure. They simply select several experiences and free-write. (To help the students, I also require they write a personal history based on archetypes, and the topics pertaining to peer pressure include initiation, outcast, scapegoats, star-crossed lovers, woman figure, and devil figure.) The students make correlations between their readings and their lives. For example, my student David has concentrated his brainstorming and free-writing on adolescent peer pressure. His list includes encounters with and not necessarily submission to drinking, dating, cheating, lying, destroying property, and deceiving others. David selects the destruction and deception topics since they appear least obvious. He and the class free-write about their topics for ten minutes. This time forces students to concrete their ideas and experiences. Ten minutes isn't enough time to develop thoughts; they're just dabbling with new ideas.

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After freewriting, students organize thoughts by reviewing notes on the rhetorical modes and devices we have already discussed. They determine whether or not their ideas work best as comparison, description, narration, definition, classification, argumentation, or an combination. The students now write for a purpose instead of writing for a mode or device. Students imitate the paradigms we discuss and informally outline their thoughts stimulated by the reading, brainstorm, freewrite, and paradigm. The students now have ideas, and perhaps a little surprising to them and to me is those ideas are organized.

SPEAKING

After the students have quickly and informally organized their thoughts, the most significant aspect of the cycle takes place. The students explain to a small group their ideas. They verbalize their outlines. David, for example, uses his outline to tell his group about peer pressure by submitting to a dare and breaking outdoor Christmas lights in the neighborhood. He also confesses pretending to be on a boy scout paper drive so he can obtain adult magazines from someone's home. The benefits of verbalization are numerous. The student forces herself to express ideas to a particular audience whom she can see and identify. As she rehearses the information from her outline, she uses examples from both her life and the essays to prove her point. She supports her assertions because her audience expects her to. Although some students are

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terrified thinking they have to express their ideas to peers, it still isn't as horrifying as the blank paper or screen threatening them. Students are weak with verbal skills, but those skills are more developed than writing skills, and students soon feel comfortable. (It's important to maintain a friendly atmosphere in the groups. I encourage the use of friends in groups, but by the end of the first few weeks of class, there really is no need since group work makes the class friendly.) As the students speak, they expand and evaluate those thoughts and experiences. The ideas become more important than words since the students don't think of every word they use. Students become more concerned with getting ideas across. The ideas flow more smoothly, and the informal setting of talking from an outline puts students more at ease than if they were writing a paper or presenting a formal speech. Speaking is simply a means to organize and present ideas. Speaking has improved my students' writings more than any other strategy.

LISTENING

While a student is speaking, the other members of her group are listening. Listening must be active to be effective. Students outline the speaker's thoughts, and since the students are familiar with the same essays, the group also analyzes how effectively the speaker has used the essays. The listeners list the main idea of the talk, list the most/least effective example, examine context and

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organization problems as well as note areas difficult to understand or needing more explanation. The students concentrate on what works well in the presentation and what needs improvement. Returning to David's paper experience, the group likes his examples of the Christmas lights and adult magazines because they're fresh, personal, and concrete. His talk is organized and easy to outline, but one group member wants more details describing David's reactions to the peer pressure and to his guilt. Another member questions a connection David has made with the examples and essays. The group does not simply respond with "It's good," or "It's bad"; they must support their assertions. The students must listen and think critically.

DISCUSSING

After the speaking/listening session, the group discuss the speaker's ideas and presentation. This is another aspect of speaking/listening, but now there is dialogue. The students respond to various questions. For example, the writer/speaker tells what main idea she wants to achieve, what her chief points are, and how she develops the idea and points. She justifies her examples and explains why she organizes her essay according to a particular paradigm, or why she thinks her ideas are worth the group's time. The readers/listeners may respond to the speech by listing what they think is successful, what they like best and places where they are lost. Listeners also ask the writer what parts of the outline give her the most trouble. David and

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his group discuss solutions to problems David should consider. For example, David asks what details he lacks describing the Christmas light episode. The group wants to participate with David as he describes that one night in his life. The details become sensuous and concrete down to the "ping" of the shattering bulb. David recreates the event and his personal guilt as being more upsetting than a dozen greasy bean burritos smoldering in his bowels, a feeling that often occurs without provocation. And David senses his ideas are not balanced. He knows the effects of negative peer pressure, but he also wants to address positive peer pressure. David relates examples of competitive peer pressure improving his study habits and golf and tennis games. He and the group dissect the ideas and David's purpose, and David decides to include one paragraph of improved tennis because of pressure.

This discussion is essential since it is the effective rewriting of something that hasn't been written yet. The speech becomes the rough draft, the discussion becomes the revision, and finally, the ideas and methods of development are becoming more and more fine-tuned. (In fact, even after this exercise, the students have done more thinking of their subject and paper than they have in the past.)

WRITING

The students are now ready to write. Since they have essentially written a rough draft by simply speaking the outline to their group, the students are far more prepared

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to write than they have been in the past. The students take their speech outline and group discussion notes and write a draft. But this time, the students are experiencing something they haven't experienced before. They know what they're going to write before they write it. They're not searching for ideas. They are not intimidated by a blank page or screen, and they're confident they have something to say with well-supported assertions. They know their audience; they're more convinced of their subject, and surprisingly to them and to me, this writing takes little time. The students are comfortable. Another interesting observation is the students are more ready to concentrate on good writing techniques because they're not forcing themselves to develop ideas and support. Students comment how relieved they feel as they write, the frustrations lessen. David writes a note on his paper saying, "This assignment was fun and easy. I wrote my paper in only thrity minutes, but I had time to revise--I've never had time nor the desire to revise before. I guess I have something to say now, so I want to say it well."

REWRITING

The students now have a very good draft, much better than the final draft they usually submit without using the cycle. I can now teach them rewriting, and they understand what it means. I tell them they have already revised when they discuss the strengths and weakness of their talk outlines and incorporate those changes into their drafts.

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Now they know that rewriting is not arranging commas and correcting the misspelled words I have circled. Rewriting means rethinking an essay. The rhetorical cycle then works all over again as the students rewrite their written draft. For example, the student prepares two copies of her paper for her group (her same group or another group). Her essay becomes the reading. She and the group members must brainstorm and think of ways to improve and strengthen the paper. She delivers her solutions to the group, they listen, then they discuss. Finally the student incorporates those ideas into another writing. This draft is more than any teacher could hope for. Technically it is only the second written draft, but actually, it is the fourth draft of that paper, each draft better the first. On this final draft the student worries about editing problems that most students associate with rewriting. The student then submits her paper.

The student has now submitted a paper full of ideas and examples. This paper is well developed with organized thoughts. What surprises the student is the little work this assignment requires and how much easier it is to have other people's input before writing. The student isn't frustrated, and if she were, her peers calm the fears. She also learns the importance of outlining and organizing thoughts before writing. She knows she has something to say. For me, the teacher, as I walk around the room listening in at different groups, I also relax knowing that

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the students are learning that good writing expresses clear, thought-out ideas, and that those ideas are more easily presented by following the rhetorical cycle: reading, thinking, speaking, listening, discussing, and writing.

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